

Written Testimony of
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Before the
New Jersey Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee
November 8, 2010

Good afternoon, Committee Chair Weinberg, Vice Chair Vitale and members of the committee. I am Karen Buonocore, the New Jersey Relationship Manager with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program. I would like to thank Chair Weinberg for inviting me to testify today on behalf of our work to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015.

Like the fellow organizations I come here with today, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (Alliance) shares the great concern for the alarming rates of childhood obesity across the nation and here in New Jersey. Over the past three years, I have had the pleasure of implementing the Alliance's Healthy Schools Program in approximately 160 schools in 11 districts across the state of New Jersey.

Founded in 2005 by the American Heart Association and William J. Clinton Foundation, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation is leading the charge against the childhood obesity epidemic by engaging directly with industry leaders, educators, parents, healthcare professionals and—most importantly—kids.

The goal of the Alliance is to reduce the nationwide prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015 and to inspire young people to develop lifelong, healthy habits.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation recognizes that schools are powerful places to not only teach young people the academic skills they need to succeed, but also healthy life skills. This is why the Alliance launched its Healthy Schools

Program in February 2006 with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Now supporting more than 9,000 schools across the United States, the Healthy Schools Program takes a comprehensive approach to helping schools create healthier environments by working with them to improve

- access to healthier foods;
- increase physical activity opportunities before, during and after school;
- enhance nutrition education; and
- establish school employee-wellness programs.

One of the most frequent questions I get asked is “***Where do schools begin in implementing the Healthy Schools Program?***” This is where our Healthy Schools Program 6-step process comes in to play, where we

- guide schools to create a school-wellness team,
- assess their school environment by using our Healthy Schools Program Inventory tool,
- develop an action plan based on their Inventory results,
- identify resources,
- take action, and of course
- celebrate success—all along the way.

At the Alliance, we know it takes time, persistence and dedication to create and sustain healthy changes in a school, which is why the Healthy Schools Program focuses on gradual, systemic changes to the school environment.

Within all of the districts I have the honor of working with in New Jersey, there has been remarkable successes made and I am thrilled to share one of their stories, the Perth Amboy School District, with you today.

The Perth Amboy School District entered their second year with the Healthy Schools Program this school year and is experiencing growing success.

During our first year, it didn't take long in Perth Amboy to find a district champion who embraced the Healthy Schools Program. My relationship with this champion was just the beginning. Last school year

- Wellness teams were developed and realistic, manageable action steps were identified.
- Some of the schools switched out unhealthy fundraisers for healthy ones and some have developed and implemented staff wellness programs.
- With support from the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Coordinated School Health Demonstration Project, Perth Amboy High School was able to purchase refurbished cardio and strength equipment for a fitness room for both students and staff to use.

This year is off to good start with the formation of a district sub-committee to work on revising the District's Wellness Policy to better address the needs of the district around nutrition, physical activity and life-long wellness.

It is the collaborative nature of this work that has been one of the keys to Perth Amboy's success. Collaborations with the CDC's Coordinated School Health Demonstration Project, Horizon Blue Cross and YMCA State Alliance's Healthy U after school program and others have provided the spark to ignite and expand our efforts in changing the culture of their schools for the healthier.

Just recently, one of Perth Amboy's Healthy Schools Program district-level champions informed me that this was the first time—in the over 30 years he's been in the district—that he's seen such awareness for health and wellness amongst the student body and couldn't be more excited about what's to come in continuing the work they are doing to guide the children of Perth Amboy to lead long, healthy lives.

It's the passion, devotion and hard work of the Perth Amboy's of New Jersey that are changing the landscape of health and wellness in schools and providing our children with the tools they need to develop lifelong, healthy habits.

Celebrating success is a major component of the Healthy Schools Program. Each year schools across the country are given the great opportunity to receive national recognition at the bronze, silver, gold and platinum levels. Last school year (2009-2010), West New York School District's Memorial High School received our first ever Gold award. Memorial was also named by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation as the "healthiest school in America"!

Overall, in my work across the state of New Jersey, the biggest lesson learned for me has been the power that resides in collaboration. It is the power of collaborative relationships that has helped make these challenging changes a reality, and I believe, will work to sustain these changes into the future.

Thank you Senator Weinberg, Senator Vitale and other members of the committee for inviting me to this hearing and allowing me to share my thoughts on this important issue.

Materials:

- Alliance for a Healthier Generation one-page overview
- Healthy Schools Program one-page overview